

Antigone and Electra: The Tragic Hero(ines) of Greek Drama

Dr Nisha Francis Alapatt

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vimala College, Thrissur, Kerala, India

Abstract— It is a widely accepted fact that the modern Western theatre originated largely from the ancient Greek theatre. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are studied for the dramatic conventions followed even today. Aristotle, the father of literary criticism found the epitome of a 'tragic hero' in Oedipus. Even though there were several powerful women who played significant roles in Greek plays, Aristotle did not particularly mention a 'hero(ine)' in his Poetics. And the term 'hero' is commonly used as a gender-neutral term referring to both male and female protagonists even when the dictionary makes a distinction between male and female protagonists through the terms 'hero' and 'heroine' respectively.

Keywords— Tragedy, tragic hero, tragic hero(ine), patriarchy, feminist

This paper proposes to analyse the characters Antigone and Electra in Sophocles' plays *Antigone* and *Electra* respectively as tragic hero(ines) from an Aristotelian perspective of the hero. Studies have already been done with respect to seeing Antigone and Electra as 'heroes'. It would be unfair to generalise these powerful hero(ines) under the broad term 'hero' and to reduce them as mere objects of patriarchy. The gender neutral term 'hero' will either make them equal to or less than equal to their male counterparts even though they are portrayed with great emotional depth and agency in the plays. The paper will also try to highlight the neglect, discrimination and gender biases that existed in ancient Greek culture and theatre as represented in the plays and also analyse the hero(ines) from a contemporary feminist perspective.

Aristotle conceived the tragic 'hero' as a man of noble birth, possessing 'hamartia' that eventually leads to his down fall or tragedy. The eponymous protagonists of the plays *Antigone* and *Electra* are of noble birth and so they can also be considered as hero(ines). The extreme boldness and the sense of honour and the stubborn pursuit of justice of the heroines can be viewed as their 'hamartia' and the 'tragedy' occurs to them because of these 'errors' in their character. We realise that the tragedy happened to them not due to any

serious 'tragic flaw' in their character but because they violated the "unwritten and unshakeable laws" of men in an attempt to remove inequality and injustice prevailing in the society. Their tragedy also evokes genuine pity in the mind of the audience, as it happens in an Aristotelian tragedy.

Culturally, the Greeks were highly patriarchal and the Greek plays generally represented the ideals and flaws of masculinity. The Athenian audience consisted mainly of men and all the main issues were projected through the eyes of the males. The theme of tragedy in ancient Greece was mostly the sufferings of kings and noblemen. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* which projected the ideal "tragic hero" was considered the masterpiece of a classical Aristotelian tragedy. In this context it becomes highly paradoxical that Sophocles' own plays *Antigone* and *Electra* become significant to the study of the portrayal of women characters and most particularly of tragic hero(ines).

The powerful women characters in these plays become relevant not only to the study of the ancient theatre but also for the study of the evolution of modern theatre. Even though Antigone and Electra are fictitious characters in these plays, the relevance of these heroines in the modern feminist studies cannot be underestimated. They become true hero(ines) in every sense in the display of courage and bravery in the pursuit of equality and justice.

Antigone and *Electra* are among the few Greek plays that depicted both strong and vulnerable female characters even though their roles were constrained by societal norms. The 'noble women' in Greek society were never mentioned by others in public in terms of either praise or blame. The hallmarks of Greek women were politeness, modesty and their peace loving nature. The Greek stage presented only women who exemplified these traits. However, this construct of Greek women gave them only secondary roles on stage. In a play, they were mostly given insignificant roles and were not allowed to make opening appearance on stage. Athenian women mostly appeared on stage only as part of rituals and ceremonial processions (*pompe*) and usually, only one female character was allowed on stage at a time. And it was usually a noble, unmarried female (*parthenos*) who got the privilege for the ceremonial

processions on stage. Another interesting feature of the highly patriarchal Greek theatre was that the roles of female characters were sometimes done by males. Thus, the Greek theatre tried to reduce the presence of female characters on stage by minimising their appearance on stage. Despite all these realities, the Greek plays explored and challenged the possibilities of female characters and they became pivotal to the richness of Greek theatre.

Sophocles showed great boldness to craft characters like Antigone and Electra even at a time when the female presence was minimal in script and on stage. He even taunted his own male characters Eteocles and Polynices for aping Egyptian men who did the housekeeping and embroidery while their wives went out to earn the daily bread (*Antigone* 81). Though Sophocles gave great autonomy to his female characters he was very vigilant about the receptivity of these characters by the Greek audience. And the contradiction is that while being made iconic hero(ines), they were also restricted by patriarchal expectations. In his plays, Sophocles has subtly made Antigone and Electra render apologies for making appearances on stage and they are very often criticised by other characters for their forwardness. Their revolutionary ideas went side by side with their roles of a daughter or sister in the family.

Antigone fights for equal rights for her brothers and Electra fights for justice to her dead father. Their “disobedience” to the laws of society should not be seen as an apparent violation of societal rules but should be considered as a righteous demand to give equal representation and justice for their family members. What differentiates these hero(ines) from the heroes of other popular Greek tragedies is that they fight not for a personal cause but for the cause of their dear ones and they prove that they are not simply noble in birth but noble in their deeds also. These women are sometimes more heroic than their male counterparts and they can be viewed as the Athenian males’ ‘other’ who had the courage to fight for the equality of all. This is where they are to be seen as strong women with agency and this is what makes them true hero(ines) in the ancient and in the modern sense.

Throughout the plays, both Antigone and Electra are seen to put up a strong resistance against being reduced to a mere “second sex”. Antigone fights to the end to give a befitting burial to her brother by rebelling against the man made laws. She is not afraid of being convicted for showing reverence to her brother by disobeying the king’s edicts and willingly courts death for doing what she thinks is just to her. This makes her a stronger and more powerful character in comparison to her sister Ismene who lacks the agency and courage to fight for a legitimate cause. Ismene even

dissuades her sister Antigone from taking extreme steps as she is afraid of the wrath of the people around her.

We understand that Antigone’s “crime” of burying her brother Polynices is intensified in the play only because she is a woman. Antigone is least shaken when she is caught and brought in front of Creon for burying Polynices. She is audacious enough to oppose Creon when he tries to insult her saying that she is merely a girl with “proud spirit” and that he will not allow “women’s law” prevail in his country. Maybe, what Creon implies here is that only man made laws could prevail in his country. He is arrogant to the extent of saying that he holds the law and that nobody should violate it and never a woman. No threat from Creon intimidates her and she proudly retorts that he is a mere “man” who has no power to override the unwritten, unalterable laws of God and heaven.

Both Electra and Antigone have to face drastic consequences for their independence and disobedience. The severest punishment Antigone gets was a life of eternal spinsterhood. Spinsterhood as a form of punishment was indeed a trick invented by the patriarchal society to wipe out the quintessentially feminine attributes of the woman and finally even the memory of the rebellious women. Antigone will be locked up in a dungeon and “condemned alive to solitary death” so that she could never be a bride or a mother in her life. This is actually the worst form of punishment given to disobedient women in order to wipe out their kinship line and consequently their names from the annals of history. This is the penalty that Antigone has to pay for behaving quite ‘manly’ in front of the Athenians. Antigone shows extreme boldness in courting death for justice and this makes her very different from other men and women in the play and consequently qualifies her as a tragic hero(ine).

Electra also remains an unmarried woman in the play. At certain occasions in the play, Electra is made to rethink her decision. She laments her fate and sometimes feels that she should do things to earn public respect. Before the murder Electra proclaims: “I have learned my lesson at last, learned how to serve the will of those who have upper hand” (*Electra* 115). We don’t know whether Sophocles deliberately writes this dialogue to pacify the Athenians by making women say and do things that please men or to make them appear inferior to men. Though Electra plans and broods over the murder of her mother and her lover, it is finally her brother who does it. The twist in the play was perhaps intentionally created by the author to give less shock to the audience and more credit to the male or to make Electra more appealing to the Greek sensibility and not because Electra couldn’t take the vengeance singlehandedly.

It is very evident that the “superwoman” feats of Antigone and Electra are disliked by the male authorities. But their sense of justice drives them to continue their fight till their end. They prove their courage and strength in front of the world within the limitations imposed on them by patriarchy and we find no other character in the two plays who show as much courage as Antigone and Electra.

Though Antigone’s presence dominates the play *Antigone*, it is also balanced with the overshadowing presence of Creon’s. Both Antigone and Creon get almost equal representation in the play and one sometimes doubts who the true protagonist of the play is. So is the case with Electra in *Electra*. Even though Electra is not as articulate as Antigone is, she remains stubbornly strong willed about her purpose.

Ismene, Antigone’s sister and Chrysothemis, Electra’s sister are very timid to protest against the male authority and they succumb to their vulnerability as women in a patriarchal society. They even warn their sisters about the consequences of their protest against male authority. Ismene and Chrysothemis are shown as cowardly women characters who behave exactly like the Greek audience wants them to behave and their representation in the play is minimal. Many a time in the play Ismene and Chrysothemis try to dissuade Antigone and Electra from going further with their plans that might probably provoke the men folk and rulers. But Electra and Antigone do not believe in the silly comforts of conforming to patriarchy. Their morally weaker sisters subject themselves to male domination and find excuses for not confronting men.

Chrysothemis warns Electra that she is only a woman and so weaker than her enemy. She also tells her that their father might after all forgive them for not avenging his murder. Even the chorus warns Electra that prudence and caution are very essential in life. Ismene dissuades Antigone on a similar tone: ‘O think, Antigone; we are women; it is not for us to fight against men; our rulers are stronger than we/And we must obey in this, or in worse than this’ (*Antigone* 128). The siblings of Antigone and Electra believe that men are innately superior to women and they have to support patriarchy for their survival. If the two sisters in each play had stood united and worked together, the plays would have reached an altogether different climax. Perhaps Sophocles envisioned this calamity and managed to avoid the bonding of female characters in the plays to avoid an unforeseen ending to the plays. Sophocles made the hero(ines) more acceptable to the audience by balancing the play with strong male characters like Creon, Haemon, Aegisthus and Orestes. Electra gets mental support from her brother Orestes and Antigone gets support from her sympathising lover Haemon, Creon’s son. The other female characters in

the plays also maintain the equilibrium in the plays so that the Greek audience would not accuse Sophocles of giving too much freedom to the hero(ines).

It is very obvious that Sophocles granted his hero(ines) ‘isegoria’ (equal right to speak in public) and ‘parrhesia’ (freedom to speak boldly) which were enjoyed only by the male citizens. This is what makes the two tragedies *Antigone* and *Electra* ‘democratic’ (demokratikon). These literary tragedies may not be necessarily the document of the real life of any age but they provide commendable insight into the unrepresented ‘other’ in society. We see both plays *Antigone* and *Electra* challenging the hegemonic value system to give “voice to characters from all (marginalised) groups” (Easterling 118). Both Antigone and Electra earned the title of hero(ine)s by revolutionising the ancient Greek theatre in terms of character and representation. By protesting against the tyranny and patriarchal norms in society, the two hero(ine)s script their history and get the recognition they deserve in society and in art. These plays become important in feminist studies as we hear the excluded and silenced voices of women in them. By challenging the male dominance and by breaking the mould of ‘invisibility’ and ‘inferiority’ attributed to women they declare freedom to remain not as “absent sign” or “silenced presence” on stage but to become the representatives of fully emancipated women and in every sense true hero(ines).

REFERENCES

- [1] Baldry, H.C. *Ancient Culture and Society: The Greek Tragic Theatre*. Norton/Chatto & Windus, 1971.
- [2] Beaton, Roderick. *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- [3] Bremmer, Jan. ed. *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*. Routledge, 2002.
- [4] Easterling, P.E. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. UK: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- [5] Kitto, H.D.F. *Greek Tragedy*. London: Methuen, 1966.
- [6] Sophocles. “Antigone,” *The Complete Greek Tragedies*. eds. David Greene and Richmond Lattimore. U of Chicago Press, 2013.
- [7] Sophocles. “Electra,” *The Complete Greek Tragedies*. eds. David Greene and Richmond Lattimore. U of Chicago Press, 2013.